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The history of safety campaigns and material culture; or, what historical significance does the humble serviette hold?

Some of the best finds in the archives are those we don't expect. On a recent research trip to the headquarters of the [Royal Society for the Protection of Accidents](#) (RoSPA), I examined various uncatalogued home and workplace safety campaign materials in order to research fire, burn and scald prevention, each serious domestic accidents. I rifled through numerous early-1970s safety-planning publications produced by RoSPA's policy committees, which were sent to local branches for their work with employers, schools, health authorities and other organisations. Home Safety Planning Guide No. 66, for example, was produced for RoSPA's winter campaign of October 1971-March 1972, which targeted fireworks and accidents associated with Christmas. Its Industrial Safety Campaign Planning Guide No. 17, produced in 1972, was part of a springtime drive around personal protection in the workplace called "Let's Make It Safe".

These guides contained a variety of ephemera, including leaflets, bookmarks and, much to my surprise, paper serviettes – each highly decorative and depicting specific safety messages. Another serviette appeared in a folder containing miscellaneous leaflets, which RoSPA's Information Services Manager, Helen Shaw, had pulled out for me to look at. This third serviette wasn't dated, but it was of a similar design to the others and was presumably their contemporary, as I have found no reference to serviettes in any of RoSPA's previous or subsequent campaigns.

The first serviette (fig. 1) incorporates a colourful design of what appears to be a poinsettia, surrounded by four safety messages flanked by snowflakes: 'Keep paper chains away from electric lights', 'Always clear away wrapping paper', 'Use flame resistant material for fancy dresses', and 'Guard against FIRE – no cards on the mantelpiece'. RoSPA had organised annual Christmas safety campaigns since at least the 1930s, framed around simple domestic safety tips. The serviette, whilst containing similar tips to those found on posters and bookmarks, was available for display and use for festive family dining.

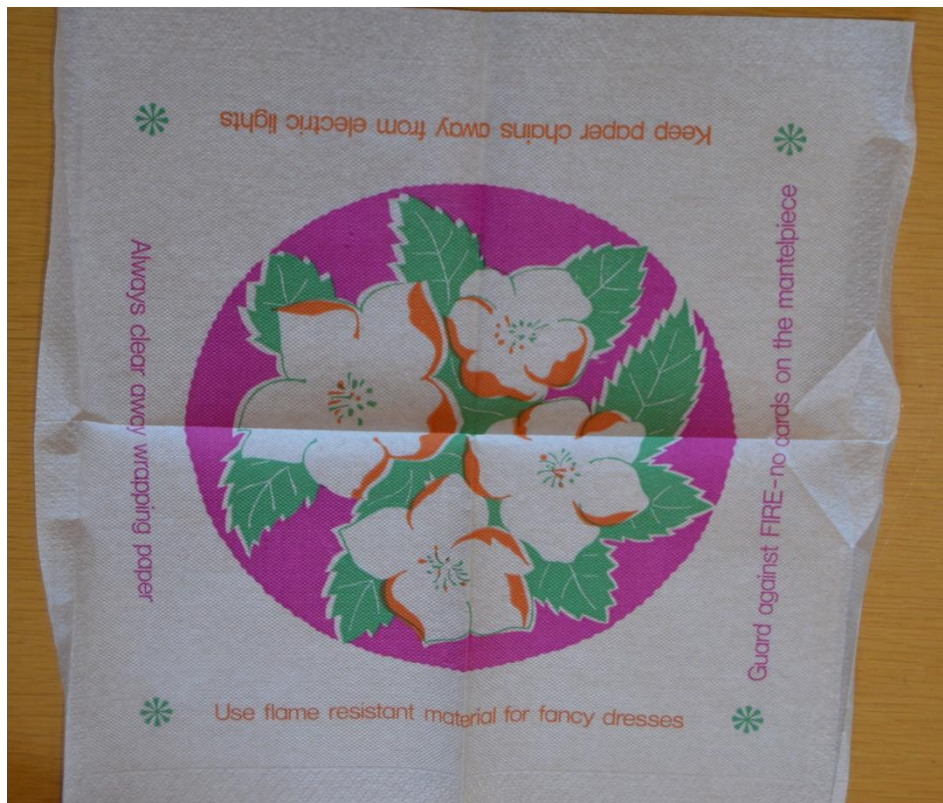


Fig. 1: RoSPA Home Safety Planning Guide No. 66, 1971-72.

The second serviette (fig. 2) used a mixture of 'humorous' cartoons and warnings against workplace accidents, all involving men performing manual tasks. For example, 'Why fall for this: keep a guard rail round all openings' accompanies an image of a man carrying a box who is about to fall into an unguarded manhole because he's too preoccupied leering at the woman walking past; an instance of casual sexism, but one suggested as potentially carrying a penalty. This serviette centred on trips and falls, rather than burns and scalds, which indicated that these were more common accidents facing 1970s male manual workers. Indeed, many of the workplace safety posters produced by RoSPA stressed the importance of taking care in order to *avoid* accidents. The serviette was a novel way to publicise this message in works canteens.



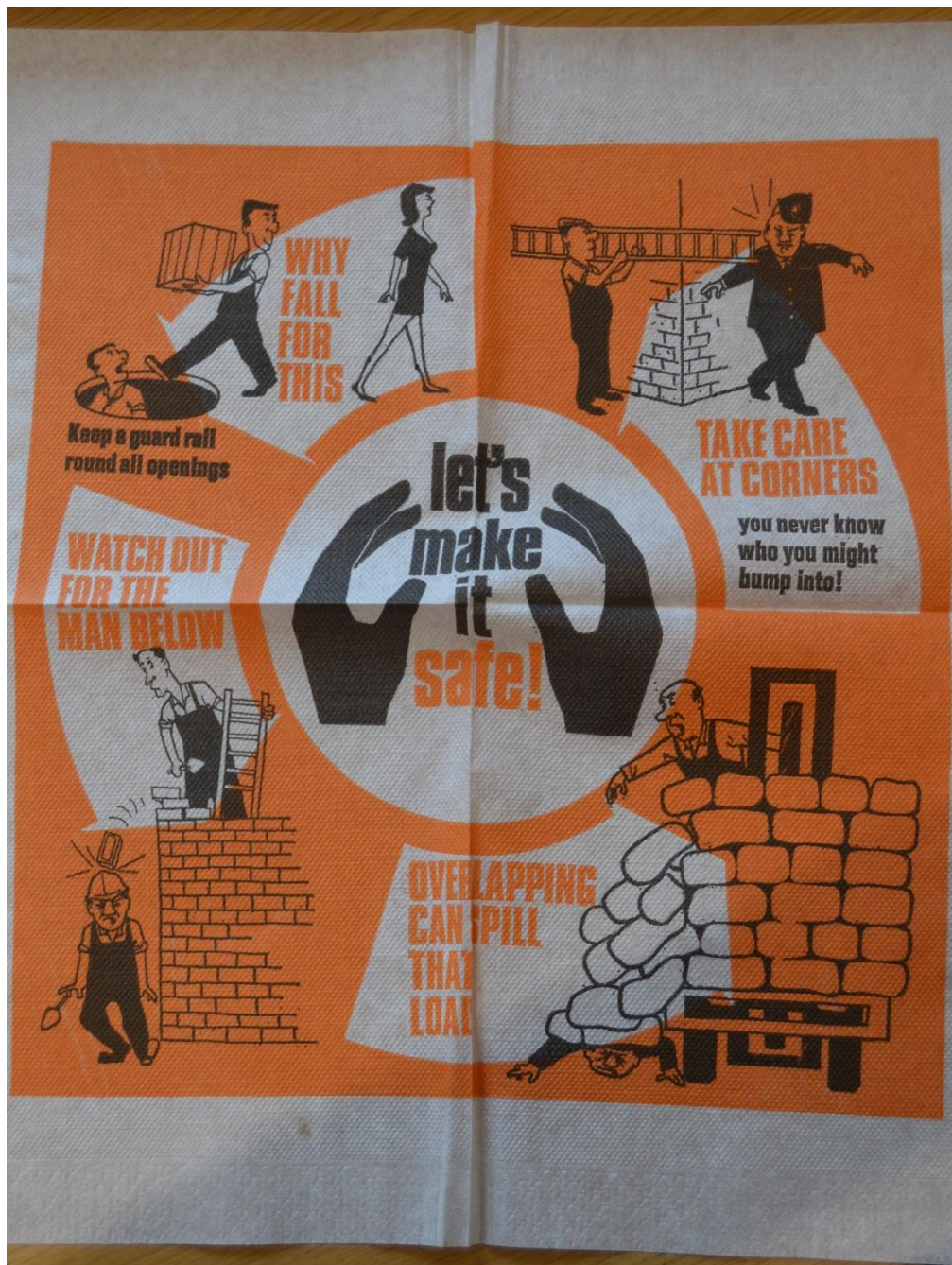


Fig. 2: RoSPA Industrial Safety Campaign Planning Guide No. 17, 1972.

The third serviette (fig. 3) used a blue design depicting cherubs, surrounded by party-style food and drink, with four alliterative messages related to what might have been the most common risks associated with children's parties: 'Pills: Lock away all medicines', 'Plugs: Never use a damaged connector', 'Parties: Keep a guard on the fire', and 'Pots: Turn handles inwards'. RoSPA ran various campaigns from the 1950s onwards, aimed at these four domestic hazards, and commonly identified them as safety risks to infants. In its 1971 *Annual Report*, of the 3,530 home accidents to children aged under 12 months in that year, 620 (18%) were burns. It is no surprise that the fire-guard and pan-handle were depicted as hazards.



*Fig. 3: RoSPA Leaflets Folder 2: General Home Safety, not dated.*

But the question remains, why would RoSPA take the novel approach of printing and distributing these serviettes for use in its campaign literature?

According to Grant Harrold, The Royal Butler, serviettes are traditionally used to wipe the mouth when eating standing up, such as at a cocktail reception or a fast-food restaurant, whereas napkins are used for more formal seated meals. Various writers have commented on napkin and serviette etiquette; some, such as Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, have even cited their dinner-table use as an indicator demarcating the lower-middle class in post-war Britain. Either way, serviettes were designed to be used by people who are eating 'on the go', or who lead busy lives, and were therefore disposable.

The safety messages don't diminish the basic function of the serviettes; indeed, they even enabled access to specific audiences. However, they were also designed to speak to the user at critical times, when the significance of the message is heightened: for example, worker productivity drops off after lunch, so a reminder about safety isn't a bad idea. Studies of domestic accidents reveal that children are at greater risk of experiencing burns when unsupervised – parties and other family celebrations can be frenetic; home serviettes were presumably designed to provide a timely reminder to parents.

It's fair to conclude that these serviettes were unsuccessful in *sustaining* awareness about safety, because their production was quickly discontinued. Ultimately, serviette disposability rendered the safety message obsolete. But their introduction indicates safety-campaigners' willingness to engage with vulnerable groups, and to communicate the safety message through a variety of visual, textual and material means. They imply that standard methods of targeting communities – posters, magazines, films and the like – didn't work for everybody, particularly those working in home safety. By using a mundane object such as a serviette to highlight specific dangers, the safety message was, for a brief period at least, normalised as part of routine everyday behaviour at meal-times. As such, the humble serviette, however briefly, carried important messages to encourage safety consciousness in our daily lives.